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ABSTRACT

Beauty, commercials, and hatred can be linked in an analysis of the dominant structures of advertising. Television commercials such as the one quoted in the title use a common rhetorical method: present an ideal state; imply that the viewer has not attained this state; offer a magical object which will connect the viewer with the desired state; and tell the viewer how to evoke that magic. This same structure is often used in sermons, and in both cases, emphasis is placed on the importance of the mediator and the powerlessness of the listener. By using beautiful, idealized images that have no connection with the product being sold, commercials lead viewers to aspire to high ideals but provide them with means that will surely fail in the quest to attain those ideals. This may result in alienating people from the very values being exploited in the commercials, laying the groundwork for despair, hatred, resentment and apathy. (One table of data and three figures are included, and 37 references are attached.) (MHC)

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"Don't Hate Me Because I'm Beautiful": A Commercial in Context

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"Don't Hate Me Because I'm Beautiful"

A Commercial in Context

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Abstract

In discussing a single line on a single television commercial, the author seeks to provide the most fundamental requirement for interpreting meaning: a context that makes sense of it. Because the line turns on "hate" and because it uses some of the strategies that have led critics to label advertising as a form of religion, terms from the traditional moral vocabulary have been used in interpreting the commercial. The commercial is analyzed as a "mythic" way for ritually discharging envy. Despair, envy, and hate are considered as potential byproducts of the cognitive strategies employed in certain types of advertising.

You are watching network television. It is late evening, the time of *Dallas* and *Falconcrest*. Even more suddenly than most commercials begin, a gorgeous model appears on the screen, looking directly at you with those compelling, magazine-cover eyes. Her voice is friendly, direct, and in complete control. By the time you become aware of her, you have heard her say:

"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful."

The line is carefully delivered. Its emphasis falls, lightly, on "beautiful," almost as if, discarding "beautiful" as a reason, we might find other causes to hate her. But like most television, the line (which takes about two seconds) melts into the commercial, then flows into the ongoing dramas of power, passion, and perfection that haunt the television landscape.

But wait: That's an astonishing statement--"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful." It begs a question. Is it, "Why would anyone hate a beautiful woman?" Not quite. More like: "Why would anyone hate a beautiful woman on a commercial?" More fully, I think the question is this: Can we find a way of looking at beauty, commercials, and hatred-- that makes a link among them plausible?

I'd like to argue that we can.

Recent critical works on advertising employ a variety of approaches. In *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising,* Williamson (1976) analyzes a collection of individual print ads for recurring themes and semiotic patterns. Her commentaries are often lively, provocative, literate, and insightful. Goffman (*Gender Advertisements*, 1979) brings an imposing sociological relativism to a selection of print ads, in order to illustrate how ads employ stylized versions of gestures and postures--"hyperritualized" gestures--to signal the relations between the sexes. Leymore's *Hidden Myth: Structure and Symbolism in Advertising* (1975), caps a wide- ranging series of observations with a structuralist analysis of advertisements from print and television. Her discussion culminates in mathematical analyses of the basic "binary pairs" structuralists seek in myths--opposites like endogenous/exogenous, happiness/misery, nature/culture--and the results, while fascinating, are rarefied.

Any individual ad makes sense only against a larger backdrop.

In *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture,* Ewen (1976) traces modern advertising as an essential function of the rise of mass production and consumption. Advertising is depicted as one of the main ways people's minds are kept oriented to serve the structures of the capitalist system of production. Drawing from psychoanalysis, anthropology, and especially Marx, Jhally (*The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society,* 1987) criticizes advertising as a system where products function like magical fetishes that help mass media and the marketplace replace traditional institutions.

In this paper, I draw upon these authors less for their technical methods than for the broad issues they hold in common. They all consider ads culturally significant. They all look for recurring structures in ads and deep structures beneath them: "[Advertising] obviously has a function, which is to sell things to us. But it has another function, which I believe in many ways replaces that traditionally fulfilled by art or religion. It creates structures of meaning." (Williamson, 1978, 12). Though they consider ads a force influencing people, these authors (in varying degrees) emphasize that people participate in advertisements as active interpreters, not as pawns. For each of these authors, advertisements form some kind of system that must be approached as a whole: Any individual

ad makes sense only against a larger backdrop, what Goffman calls "the realm of being of which the drama in every individual ad is but an instance" (22).

My methodology is much closer to literary analysis. It resembles the approach used by a fellow student of literature, Kenneth Burke, in *The Rhetoric of Religion*. It is an attempt to uncover relationships inherent in the structure of certain dominant strategies of advertising-- and to use those to interpret "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful." We take the line as a given, then try to create a context in which it makes sense.

The Company She Keeps: Values in Commercials

The immediate context for any commercial consists of other commercials. Viewers apparently remember and compare commercials. That supposition underlies Frank Deford's 1984 scrapbook on the Miller Lite commercials. On a deeper level, advertising--as Williamson and others have argued--forms a system of meaning. The TV viewer "sees all advertisements as one, or rather, sees their rules as applicable to one another and thus part of an interchangeable system." (Williamson, 1978, 13). Many television commercials, for example, are loaded with images of ways to be. Watching them, you are virtually flooded by images of values, ideals, desirable states of being--such as liveliness, fun, pleasure, self confidence, contact with nature, family closeness, sex appeal, success, power, sophistication, popularity, patriotism, youth, adventure, superior knowledge--and, of course, beauty.

A commercial of this kind from the summer of 1987 shows vivid, masterly scenes of idealized family togetherness. Parents, children, and grandparents move together in a miniature drama of family closeness. They smile, they move close to one another, they look at one another with glowing fondness. Their world consists of 30 seconds of an idealized relationship. As the commercial goes on, M&Ms candy plays in increasing role in this togetherness, until it seems to be the cause, the motivating force behind the happiness of the participants. M&Ms share the stage with a nearly mythical moment of magical togetherness.

Table 1.

A rhetorical structure shared by commercials and sermons.

Sermon	Commercial
God and Heaven, the state of being saved.	Ideal states, such as beauty, sophistication, liveliness, family togetherness, individual fulfillment.
The listener is a sinner separate from God.	The viewer lacks and desires these ideal states.
Christ mediates between the sinner and God and provides sure access to Heaven.	The product, directly or indirectly, promises to link the viewer to the desired state.
Repent, believe, be baptized, and you will be saved.	Buy the product and you will attain the ideal.

Many commercials follow a similar strategy: Images of desirable states of being are associated with products. In *The Best Thing on Television: Commercials*, Jonathan Price quotes advertising author Walter Taplin to illustrate how the approach is recognized and discussed in the advertising industry:

> "Most of the things we want are not material but mental. We want states of mind. The advertiser, beginning with a material object, which is to be sold, suggests the states of mind which may be achieved by the purchaser" (50).

Here are some recent examples. When environmental awareness grew in the '70s, tobacco companies presented glorious images of backpackers communing with nature (and with their cigarettes). As jogging became popular, many commercials featured images of happy joggers--associated with unlikely sponsors (such as banks) that had nothing to do with jogging. As our divorce- torn culture groped for the meaning of family in the early '80s, idealized images of family togetherness, family reunions, and traditional extended families appeared on many commercials, associated with candy, diet cola, fast foods, and other products. Around a decade ago, billboards began to announce "Alive With Pleasure!" and implied that the product responsible for this happy state was Newport cigarettes. A current commercial states, "There's someone exciting living inside you," and offers a product to set that person free.

Through such advertising, products become the connecting link between people and a wide range of personal, social, and psychological ideals.

To the extent such a commercial is successful, it convinces us (on some level) that the product is a good way, the best way, or the only way to achieve the ideal state celebrated in the ad. For the ad to be successful, its product must become the link between our reality and the idealized image. Through such advertising, products become the connecting link between people and a wide range of personal,

social, and psychological ideals.

Advertising and Sermons

Commercials repeatedly imply that products can connect us with almost any conceivable value. Watching them, you might conclude that virtually any desirable state of being can be attained, if only you purchase the right products. The seemingly innocent M&M commercial, for example, is structured to imply that M&Ms bring families together. The commercial implies that the ideal--family togetherness--comes to us by means of the power of the product.

Commercials of this kind employ a common rhetorical method: Present an ideal; convince your audience they need it but do not have it; convince them that you have the secret for moving from where they are to the desired state; tell them what to do next. This structure has frequently been used in sermons, especially at the revival meetings of my youth, where it appeared in this form: There is a God and heaven. Due to Adam's fall and your own failings, you are separate, a sinner. Christ is the only link between you and God. Embrace Christ and you will enter the desired state of being saved. Refuse Christ and you will not only remain a sinner in this life, after death you will live forever in damnation. Now, since you clearly don't want to burn in Hell forever, come down to the prayer rail and be saved. (See Table 1.)

In both cases, the method of presentation is designed to emphasize the importance of the mediator and the powerlessness of the listener. In both sermon and commercial, viewers are led to feel that they lack something, they are cut off from an ideal state of being which they can attain only through a mediator. Jhally (1987, 171) uses the term "fetishism" to describe consumer products in the same series of relationships: a desired state, a separation, a magical object that connects you, and a ritual for evoking that magic. In advertising, the product serves as mediator between us and the image of beauty--or other desired states of being. The product symbolically becomes the savior, the mediator, the fetish, the efficacy that promises to save us from the ordinary and elevate us to the company of those perfect beings whose images grace so many advertisements.

The Two Faces of the Ideal

In his study of gender in print ads, Goffman illustrated how the models in ads abstract certain gestures which reveal social relations, then project those gestures in simplified, amplified, "hyperritualized" form. Even animals are susceptible to selective, exaggerated versions of the normal. In his classic study of the herring gull, the ethologist Niko Tinbergen (1953) found that the the begging response of the newly hatched chick was triggered by a red spot on the bottom of the parent gull's bill. Through an elaborate series of experiments, he pinpointed just which features (position of the red spot, color, contrast, color of bill, head color, head shape, shape of bill, lowness, position of bill, etc.) trigger the response. He was then able to construct a model which the chick preferred to the real thing! In other experiments, Tinbergen constructed stimuli other birds preferred above natural stimuli. An oystercatcher, for example, will prefer a giant, specially-painted model of an artificial egg to its own egg. Normal responses--even those vital to survival--can be subverted by symbolic stimuli that are more powerful than natural stimuli.

People are also susceptible to what Tinbergen called "supernormal sign stimuli."

People are also susceptible to "supernormal sign stimuli" (as he called them in *The Study of Instinct*, 44). Tinbergen discussed one example: exaggerated sign stimuli derived from the face of the human baby. He observed that dolls, films, and the pet trade all employ idealized baby faces. Here is his characterization of the elements that go into the idealized baby face: It must have " a small facial part and a large brain part of the head. Moreover, its cheeks must be fat and rounded. The baby's crying, and its clumsy movements, are also necessary to make it really cute." (*Herring Gull*, 223).

Advertising's easy-looking images of hard-earned perfection may, in general, work like hypernormal stimuli. Such images certainly do not come easily. Diamant (1970) and Arlen (1980) documented the mind-boggling lengths to which a producer will go to achieve the fleeting images in 30- or 60- second commercial. No family can be as perfect as the one pictured. Few moments in life can have the immediacy of the AT&T commercial that took weeks to stage, shoot, and edit. We can seldom reach out and touch so vividly, so completely, so gorgeously, so ideally, as those immaculately staged images do in the ads. Technology amplifies the ads' perfection. Anyone who has attended a demonstration of the Scitex graphics workstation can verify how easy it is for graphic designers to make magazine pictures even "more perfect"--deleting inconvenient portions of the picture, enhancing color balances, moving component parts of the image around, even importing images from other photographs--all without leaving a trace.

No one can look as good as the picture or video image of a fashion model--not even the models themselves, whose looks are for the camera. In life, many models are said to look startlingly skinny. A book like Cheryl Tieg's *The Way to Natural Beauty*, documents the immense effort required for a professional model to maintain her casual good looks. One line suggests the magnitude of the labor of being beautiful: "I hate spending *even an hour* fussing in front of a mirror in the morning" (19, italics added). As a result of her labors, she became one of those who embodied the ideals of beauty and presented them for women to emulate.

The supernormal images of perfection presented on the media (such as a

photograph of Cheryl Tiegs) are worth some thought, because any kind of guiding image has a double nature. One the one hand, idealized images can uplift and give direction. In the pursuit of the unattainable, people attain great things. The uplifting ideal may be to love like Jesus, to manifest the compassion of the Buddha, to show the wisdom of a beloved Rabbi, to be the fastest runner in history, to raise a happy family, to look like Jane Fonda at 45, to live a balanced life, to bring about world peace, to end hunger, and so on. Even if you try but fail to attain such ideals, you can remain pointed in the right direction and ennobled by the effort. We belong to a culture guided by unattainable ideals: liberty, equality, happiness. Noble failure while pursuing great ideals is central to our striving, romantic spirit. For Americans, the hyperreal has often been merely a way of pointing us toward a future that has exceeded science fiction's wildest dreams.

But idealized images are uplifting only when there is some way to move from where you are in the direction of the values implicit in the image. If there is nothing to connect you with the image, so that the ideal seems unattainable, you can feel cut off from it. If the ideal is important and the gap formidable, an unbridgeable gap may seem to loom before you. Instead of inspiring you to cross that gap, the separate, unattainable ideal begins to mock you and becomes a torment. In the worse case, you can become obsessed by an ideal, yet feel you have absolutely no means of moving from where you are to it, or even toward it. You can become stuck, powerless to move toward what you most desire.

By using idealized images that have no connection with the product, commercials may be promoting, not the joining of the viewer and the ideal, but just such a separation. Through certain strategies in commercials, we are led to desire various states of mind, yet we are misled in the means for achieving them. By depicting highly-valued states of being, yet offering no avenue to those states except consumer products, commercials make us the cognitive equivalent of sinners: cut off from the ideals we aspire to and mocked by the mediators that promise to take us to that heaven implied by television images. In showing us what to aspire to, but providing us means that will surely fail, advertising has given us a formula for despair.

"Despair" may sound like a harsh word to apply to a commercial, but I believe it is accurate. I am not implying that television viewers are all lying around in paralytic states of despondency. Rather, I want to suggest that certain advertising strategies provide the cognitive preconditions for a well-known state of being whose structure has been documented for centuries. Turning to an excellent summary from experts on the subject--the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*--we find this definition: Despair "signifies a positive act of will by which a man gives up the expectation of salvation because he considers that, in his own case at any rate, it is a thing too difficult to be achieved." Because of my early training, I tend to turn to literature first for illustrations, and we find one of the most powerful depictions of despair in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, a play contemporaneous with the early works of Shakespeare. In his last scene, Faustus finds he must live out his part of the bargain and surrender his soul in exchange for his great knowledge.

> O, I'll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?
> See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!
> One drop would save my soul, half a drop! Ah, my Christ!

Notice how he portrays his desired ideal--salvation--as something far away. Although he can vividly imagine the heaven of his desires, he finds himself with no way to attain it. He is unable to reach up toward that salvation, and no mediator reaches down to him. The God of love becomes been transformed into a God of wrath:

> Where is it now? 'Tis gone. And see where God
> Stretcheth out his arm and bends his ireful brows.
> Mountains and hills, come, come , and fall on me,
> And hide me from the heavy wrath of God....
> My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!

I am not calling upon these sources for their Christian perspective, but to point out how much the inner structure of despair resembles the way I have just analyzed advertising: one is enticed to desire an ideal, then cut off from all means of attaining it.

In showing us what to aspire to, but providing us means that will surely fail, advertising has given us a formula for despair.

Advertising promotes despair of this kind, first, by surrounding us with images of unattainable perfection. Second, advertising promotes despair by implying that the product will deliver the ideal--when it can't. In both cases, consumers look across a vast gulf at the promise of values--and find that the offered means (products we buy) cannot take us there. As one critic of advertising put it: "Sadness betrays the idyll [of advertising's more-than-perfect world] .... While busying themselves with feeding us, the ads are offering to appease a more unassuageable hunger, and failing to do so." (Conrad, 118) We do not gain titillating encounters through DoubleMint Gum, a youthful dancer's vitality through diet Pepsi, family closeness through Priazzo, or power and control through Z-cars. Despair--I am arguing--is a natural byproduct of the experience structured into the way advertising promises to deliver the values implicit in its hypernormal images.

Beauty may bring its own forms of despair. Beauty, and women's relations to it, are far more complicated than just imitating the example set

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by gorgeous models in advertisements.

What Ewen called "the pursuit of beauty through consumption" (1976, 181) has a discouraging effect on many women. Women have written of the way advertising has promised that "perfection is obtained on your grocer's shelves. Perfection, cleanliness, godliness, gracious hospitality, and an adoring family are attained through the purchase of Lemon Fresh Joy and Drano." (Scott, 199). Yet many women say the pursuit of such perfection has made them not more beautiful, but more ashamed of their bodies:

> "Whole industries depend on selling us products through slick ads depicting 'beautiful' women, playing on our insecurities and fears of imperfection.... The media defines 'looking good' so narrowly that few of us ever feel we have made it... We always have to measure up to some image" (Boston Women's Health Collective, 5).

Even for women who meet the prevailing standards for "looking good," there are problems in what the poet William Butler Yeats called "the putting on of burdensome beauty." In "A Prayer for My Daughter," Yeats wished that she might be blessed with beauty, but in moderation-- not enough to draw upon her the kind of destructiveness precipitated by the beauty of Helen of Troy. In their book on the politics of beauty Lakoff and Scherr summed up the burden of beauty this way:

> "Women do not have power through beauty: beauty has power. Therein lies the paradox. Men--whose judgments are what give beauty what power it has--envy and resent women for their supposed 'power' through beauty over men's hearts and minds (and pocketbooks). Women fear the dependence upon men, since only men can unlock the 'power' of beauty and make it function to woman's advantage. Men are angry at women for possessing a power which, in fact, women do not possess; if anything, it possesses them." (279)

Arguing from a psychoanalytic framework, Holbrook in *The Masks of Hate* (1972) claims that "the glamorous images in the mass media" are manifestations of the "intense unconscious hatred of woman" that is "expressed...widely in our culture" (41).

Beauty has not always seemed so complicated. From the time of the Greeks till the early 20th century, philosophers and poets connected beauty with such glorious ideals as truth and harmony. Plato considered beauty "a self-subsisting idea shining through bodies, laws, and knowledge itself. Every beautiful thing partakes of this eternal oneness of beauty. Beauty and goodness are found together...; in fact, they are identical" (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*). For Plato, as for Dante, such ideals were the guiding lights that illuminated existence. One has only to remember the conclusion of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn:"

> "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,--that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

In contrast, listen to the words used about beauty by the modern commentators we have quoted: *vacuum, depersonalized, power, paradox, envy, fear, dependence, advantage, angry, possession*--and *hate*. We have travelled a long road to come back to that commercial for hair conditioner with such a vocabulary in mind.

Let's continue our discussion of the way advertising uses idealized images to imply that products can deliver values, by focusing on the term most central to our commercial: "envy."

The Two Faces of Envy

Near the end of *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger describes advertising in terms of envy. Advertising "proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more.... [Advertising] persuades us of such a transformation by showing us people who have apparently been transformed and are, as a result, enviable. The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour." And advertising (he uses the British term, "publicity") "is the process of manufacturing glamour." (131) Advertising, he concludes, is about the solitary happiness that comes from being envied by others.

In this sense, envy implies the admiration of others. This "envy" suggests that others might covet your possessions, looks, manner, etc., and want to be like you. Surely Berger is right in a way; advertisers must want us to want to be like those beautiful people in the ads. But envy has a dark side which has largely been lost to twentieth-century thought. For at least a thousand years, a distinction has been made among envy, coveting, and jealousy. You are jealous to protect something you already have. You covet what you want but do not have. Coveting and jealousy are minor sins. But since medieval times, envy has been considered a major term for identifying the causes of human suffering. In many versions of the Seven Deadly Sins, envy took first or second place. According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, from envy come "hatred, calumny, detraction, and many types of malevolent behavior." In *Purgatorio*, Canto XIII, Dante meets Sapia, whose punishment for malicious envy--she rejoiced to see her countrymen lose in battle--was to have her eyelids sewn shut with steel wire. Plotting the death of Cassio, Iago tossed off these chilling lines: "If Cassio do remain,/ He hath a daily beauty in his life/ That makes me ugly." (*Othello*, V.I.18- 20). Shakespeare's audience would almost certainly have recog-

On the simplest level, "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful" is the model's plea to be free from the destructive envy of the viewer.

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nized this as an instance of envy.

Modern writings on envy are rare, but the German sociologist, Helmut Schoeck, has produced a rich, scholarly volume on the subject: *Envy: A Theory of Social Behavior*. In his review of what great thinkers have said about envy, he quotes Nietzsche's compelling definition: "When some men fail to accomplish what they desire to do, they exclaim angrily, 'May the whole world perish!' This repulsive emotion is the pinnacle of envy, whose implication is, 'If I cannot have *something*, no one is to have *anything*, no one is to *be* anything!'" (179) Schoeck argues that envy is a universal drive that ranges from a spiteful *Schadenfreude* (malicious glee at another's misfortune) to horrible acts of mutilation and murder for no other reason than that the perpetrator felt belittled by the accomplishments of the victim.

I covet when I want something I do not have; I can covet my neighbor's wife, car, house, talents, or achievements. Coveting, indeed, may be one of the virtuous vices of a competitive economy; but there is nothing virtuous about envy. Coveting says, "He has it; I want it." Envy, though, says: "If I can't have it, nobody can."

Envy is frustrated desire turned destructive. Envy is what leads a child to break another child's favorite toy, or a boss to frustrate a talented employee. In the play and film, *Amadeus*, Salieri enacts a highly theatrical version of envy as he sets out to destroy Mozart for effortlessly writing music far greater than all Salieri's labors can produce. Impotent to attain the ideal, the envious person feels destructive toward it. Like despair, envy derives from the separation of the person from the object of desire, combined with a sense that one is powerless to attain what is desired (Schoeck, 17). In envy, the urge to reach out becomes the urge to destroy.

Envy seems to be a difficult concept for the modern mind. In their recent collection of wise quotes on almost every subject, *Good Advice*, for example, William Safire and Leonard Safir confuse envy with coveting and jealousy. I have given up finding the meaning of envy in Britannica III. In November, 1987, *Harper's* ran a parody in which a different agency produced an ad for each of the Seven Deadly Sins. Many of the sins were represented both keenly and humorously. The advertisement based on envy, however, left one with the feeling that envy was an amplified form of griping. Going back as far as the turn of the century, Schoeck consulted decades of *American Sociological Review, American Journal of Sociology, The British Journal of Sociology,* and other prominent journals--without finding "a single instance of 'envy,' 'jealousy,' or 'resentment' in the subject indexes." (9) Anyone unconvinced of the reality of envy will find the case argued well by Schoeck. It is remarkable that such an ancient and powerful concept can have disappeared from the moral landscape of educated people. It is even more remarkable that a television commercial could bring it back to mind.

From this perspective, the commercial acts as a surrogate myth for viewers whose cultural myths are not adequate to help them identify and deal with the socially destructive emotion of envy.

Bombarded by commercial images that imply that using a certain product will cause them to become as suave and vivacious as the beautiful woman selling it, viewers have good occasion to develop destructively envious feelings toward these idealized and unattainable images. On the television documentary, *Quest for Beauty*, Nina Blanchard, "the most famous model agent in Hollywood," discussed the hostility professional models arouse: "There is anger about beauty....I think that beautiful women provoke anger when they walk into a room." A closer term might be "envy." If you feel immune from envy, hink how satisfying it is when the cover of the *National Enquirer* shows one of those impossibly gorgeous celebrities caught looking like a drunken pig!

On the simplest level, "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful" is the model's plea to be free from the destructive envy of the viewer--the kind of envy that expresses itself in a range from catty remarks to the recent slashing of a model's face on a New York street. It echoes the plea of every person of beauty, talent, wealth, luck, or distinction--the plea for protection against the "levelling" violence of envy. It may even reflect the viewer's fear of being envied for becoming more beautiful.

We are now able to ask the central question: Why would an advertisement try to arouse such a difficult emotion in its viewers? The first answer to this question takes us into the interpretation of advertising as mythology.

Advertising as Mythology

From a variety perspectives, different writers have concluded that advertising is the consumer culture's version of mythology. Such is the theme of Leymore's book, *Hidden Myth:*

> "No society exists without some form of myth. Once this is realized, it is not very surprising that a society which is based on the economy of mass production and mass consumption will evolve its own myth in the form of the commercial. Like myth it touches upon every facet of life, and as a myth it makes use of the fabulous in its application to the mundane." (156)

The sociologist Peter Berger, not quick to embrace the structuralist approach of Leymore, defines myth as "a conception of reality that posits the ongoing penetration of the world of everyday experience by sacred forces" (1967, 110). A few hours' worth of television will show you "sacred forces" at work transforming people and products, working magic, causing cats to sing, rescuing victims from halitosis, body odor, and other fates worth than death--all on com-

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mercials which are strong candidates to meet Berger's definition of myth.

In order to understand why the makers of a commercial would want to evoke hate and envy, we must recall a central function of myths. In his book comparing Piaget and Levi-Strauss, Howard Gardner wrote:

> "Myths are designed to deal with problems of human existence which seem insoluble; they embody and express such dilemmas in a coherently structured form, and so serve to render them intelligible. Through their structural similarity to given 'real world' situations, myths establish a point of repose or equilibrium at which men can come to grips with the crucial components of the problem, and become aware of the 'fix' they are in. Thus, a myth is both intellectually satisfying and socially solidifying." (148)

The sharpest summary of this view comes from Jonathan Price, at the end of his anecdotal study, *The Best Thing on TV: Commercials:*

> "Myths [and commercials] also help us express and control in a safe way, impulses that could potentially tear our society apart.... They arouse our deepest impulses toward sex, violence, and faith, and they express these instincts while at the same time keeping that expression aesthetic, rather than physical, thus saving our society from the potential chaos of orgies and massacre." (158, 162)

To see evidence for this kind of mythology at work, turn to the magazine version of this television commercial--as it appeared, say, in the May, 1988, *Elle*. On the left, a full-page, color picture of the model's gorgeous face bears the bold headline: "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful." Facing her is a page containing a block of text and a small black and white photo of the same model looking like a wet puppy: her hair stringy, disheveled, and (especially) dull, half her face pleading, the other half pained and shadowed. The viewer of this ad does not need to ponder an envious attack upon the gorgeous model; the attack has been accomplished for you in the small picture. It is a ritual, surrogate defacement. One is given the satisfaction of seeing her defaced, without having to feel the full power of envy, violence, and guilt. The print version of the commercial supports the possibility that the ad was designed to arouse and appease the specific emotion of destructive envy. From this perspective, the commercial acts as a surrogate myth for viewers whose cultural myths are not adequate to help them identify and deal with the socially destructive emotion of envy.

Beauty, Hate, and Religion

Now that I have reached a neat conclusion, I have to complicate things by emphasizing that envy is only part of the story, and there is another way of looking at "myth." In *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Kenneth Burke analyzed the opening chapters of Genesis as the sequential spinning-out of a series of relationships that were essentially simultaneous--a horizontal version of a vertical story, so to speak. Burke wrote, "'Myth' is characteristically a terminology of quasi-narrative terms for the expression of relationships that are not intrinsically narrative, but 'circular', or 'tautological.'" (1970, 258) The context in which I want to view "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful" is mythic in Burke's technical sense. It is a linear, narrative version of what I believe to be a set of cognitive and emotional structures inherent in the kind of advertising we have been discussing.

In using techniques that are fundamentally religious, advertising inadvertently advertises religion.

I am proposing a map that locates beauty, advertising and hatred in a relationship to one another. Hate, on this map, can be reached from several directions. The fullest route comes through envy, after passing through the despair caused by believing in media images that offer inadequate means for attaining the ideals they depict. Beauty--with highlights in its conditioned hair--sits among those unattainable ideal images. (See Figure 1). After finding out ten thousand times that the product does not provide the psychological reward implied in the commercial, why should one not hate the teasing, unattainable image of the beautiful model who makes the promises?

If we hate her, it may not be for being intrinsically beautiful in her own right, but because she is part of a conspiracy--a conspiracy, among other things, to appropriate our idea of what is beautiful, along with other ideals, values, and longings--and tell us that only by consuming products can we attain them. We may hate her because, being "beautiful," she reminds us of all the values that we--as good viewers, bombarded by yearnings, yet left with no instructions but to consume--are cut off from. We may hate her not for being a sexual tease, but for being part of a system that teases and frustrates our need for valued states of being--such as family togetherness, community, self-confidence--and beauty.

There may, then, be reasons to hate her--"her" being the image in the commercial. Hate, however, is but one node in a web of reactions--and a particularly difficult place to settle. You might be able to sustain hatred if you had a specific object: something, someone to become the hated center of your life, the great counter-motivating force. But less-focussed hatred is nearly impossible to sustain; it leads past the beautiful models and their beautiful products to a soul-wearying exhaustion--fatigue--inertia. No doubt people arrive at apathy through other routes; but this pathway will suffice: from impossible ideals, through disillusion and envy to the exhaustion that lies on the other side of a wea-

rying and impotent hatred.

Because products do not provide the kind of psychic payoff promised by the imagery of advertising, we are left to doubt whether anything can. If we follow this doubt, we wind up contemplating the state of mind in which a black hole surrounds almost every product like a ghostly negative of its radiance--the black hole of failed promise.

And into this black hole, dug by advertising's exploitation of so many ideal images, steps any religion that promises to cut through the cycle of idolatry and connect us with the one great ideal that transcends all others: God, immortality, cosmic consciousness, enlightenment, the spirit world, the deep self, the light, or whatever name It has. In using techniques that are fundamentally religious, advertising inadvertently advertises religion.

Conrad (1982, 117), Jhally (1987, 197, 203), Williamson (1978, 12) and others have plainly labelled advertising a form of religion. Jhally cites a marvelous passage from drama critic Martin Esslin:

> "The TV commercial, exactly as the oldest known types of theater, is essentially a religious form of drama which shows us human beings as living in a world controlled by a multitude of powerful forces that shape our lives.... The moral universe...is dominated by a sheer numberless pantheon of numberless forces, which literally reside in every article of use or consumption, in every institution of daily life. If the winds and waters, the trees and brooks of ancient Greece were inhabited by a vast host of nymphs, dryads, satyrs, and other local and specific deities, so is the universe of the TV commercial. The polytheism that confronts us here is thus a fairly primitive one, closely akin to animistic and fetishistic beliefs...We may not be conscious of it, but this is the religion by which most of us actually live, whatever our more consciously and explicitly held beliefs and religious persuasions may be. This is the actual religion that is being absorbed by our children almost from the day of their birth." (Esslin, 1976, 271)

If you consider the resemblance between advertising and religion, this paper's use of traditionally religious moral terminology--such as envy and despair--will appear less arbitrary. Considered in terms of religion, advertising encourages people to believe that the most vivid and appealing ideals of our culture can be easily attained, if you just find the right product--or, by extension, the right savior, philosophy, church, guru, cult--or even drug. (I first made the connection between advertising and drug psychology before a U. S. Senate subcommittee in 1971.)

That is a disturbing possibility; but another possibility is even more disturbing. Years ago, Hayakawa pointed out how "poetic language is used so constantly and relentlessly for the purposes of salesmanship that it has become almost impossible to say anything with enthusiasm or joy or conviction without running into the danger of sounding as if you were selling something." (1972, 223) Could we be producing a generation that distrusts ideals altogether, because the most powerful, forceful, convincing presentations of those ideals occur on TV commercials--where the ideals are prostituted in the service of sales? Are we creating a disillusioned generation? A generation that will have difficulty not hating beauty of the kind used to manipulate and disappoint them in advertising? And will they also hate being delicately overpowered by real beauty when they encounter it in the world? After being nibbled to death by little broken promises, will people continue to be able to hope, have faith, set goals, and believe in something beyond themselves?

It is precisely this breaking of the connection between values and means that is my real subject.

In view of such questions, is it enough to reach the neutral conclusion--as some recent authors have--that advertising is merely a "modern myth," serving the same function as the mythology of traditional cultures? (cf. Leymore). That approach fails to reckon with the possibility that a mythological system may be debased, manipulative, life-negative, or one among several competing value-systems. If advertising is a genuine mythological system (which I doubt), it is surely a myth that has failed in its primary responsibility to give personal identity, community, and spiritual meaning to those it reaches.

The Broken Connection

Figure 1 depicts the thesis of this paper as a linear chain of responses. Linear sequences, however, are notoriously poor ways to represent complex interrelationships. I would like to open up Figure 1 to suggest not a sequence of emotional states that follow one another, but a network charting a set of emotional potentialities structured by advertising's appropriation of the ideal. What I am trying to suggest is not an individual path through the landscape, but a map of the landscape itself.

Figure 2 is better. At every stage, other responses are possible. The viewer can loop back to an earlier stage (for example, by becoming addicted to products) or cut across to rejoin another branch. The viewer can also leave this network of reactions and enter another context--such as going to church, writing letters to friends, or polishing rocks--in which the reactions I describe are minimal. The "off" switch should appear as an option in every step. Figure 3 is another attempt to portray the basic elements of the context in which we have interpreted the commercial. As you can see, I have not been able to pull all the ramifications of even a single line on a single television commercial into a tight focus. If this

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were a large topic, I would feel bad about reaching such a diffuse conclusion; but the small moments of daily life are, I think, the most complicated to explain.

To summarize: From what appears in advertising today, I conclude that creative, resourceful, insightful, and unscrupulous people constantly try to discover what others value most--then look for some way to hitch their product to that star. There need be no connection whatsoever.

It is precisely this breaking of the connection between values and means that is my real subject. By their very nature, few products can help us attain the ideals that are "visually promised" in so many commercials--ideals such as family togetherness, personal power, self-esteem, sociability, authoritativeness, security, sex appeal, and clear orientation in a confusing world. The promiscuous coupling of so many products with so many ideals promotes a deep confusion. Williamson called the results a kind of surrealism:

> "All ads are surreal in a sense: they connect disparate objects in strange formal systems, or place familiar objects in locations with which they have no obvious connection. We are so familiar with perfume bottles haunting desert islands and motor cars growing in fields of buttercups that their surreal qualities go unremarked. (Dali's 'Apparition of a Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach' could be the description of an everyday advertisement." (1986, 69)

Advertising is a diverse field, and not all commercials exploit ideal images or promise that products will deliver values. But commercials driven by value-laden images which are unrelated to the product may be alienating us from the very values they exploit, confusing us about how to attain those values, laying the groundwork for despair, resentment, and apathy, and even prompting us to turn outside the culture to seek ideals that do not seem corrupted. Perhaps advertising will make Buddhists of us all.

Head-down in the midst of this tangled web hangs hate--hatred of the product that fails to link us to the ideal, hatred of anything that reminds us of the tormentingly unattainable ideal, hatred of ourselves for still yearning for the exhaustingly unattainable ideal, hatred of commercials for exploiting our deepest yearnings, and hatred of those hypernormally beautiful women who promise us values but deliver only products.

If my analysis is right, the makers of this commercial have gained an audience by giving voice to a painful, elusive sentiment deep inside many of us. Not only does the commercial serve a "mythological" function of raising and ritually laying to rest a difficult emotion, the line has a more purely cognitive appeal. It plays upon us, it attracts us as problem-solvers and active interpreters of what we see and hear (Ball-Rokeach et al., 15). It works because we are context-creators: We seek to make sense out of experience. The inner resonance that it evokes (Schwartz, 1973) is so deep and so puzzling that the line gathers our attention for the rest of the commercial.

Human beings are, by nature, makers, combiners, and shifters of context. Human meaning is context-sensitive. On a perceptual level, we see "intelligently" by providing context, filling gaps, and extrapolating from cues (Gregory, *passim*). On a more cognitive level, we try to interpret every situation in terms of the contexts that make sense of it--for meaning is not given to us whole, but it is made through a rich conspiracy of communication and creativity (Berger & Luckmann, 1967;Bartlett, in Mayer, 1983, Ch. 9;).

Because our survival in the world and our understanding of it requires so much problem-solving, human beings are makers and solvers of puzzles. Hardly anything holds the attention as well as a mystery. It threatens our understanding of everything else. It nags to be integrated into what we know.

"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful" presents the viewer with an anomalous situation, a problem to solve, a dissonance calling for resolution. It tells us to stop doing something we were not doing and had not considered doing. It is strange--and the very strangeness is part of what makes it work.

The line, though, is more than strange: One can think of many lines of a similar construction that do not have holding power. For example, "Don't think of running this article through a garbage compactor." The line in the commercial works not only because it is strange, but because it connects to something real. It draws us in by resonating with experiences that are available to all participants in consumer culture--the deep disillusionment created by ads that promise values but deliver only products. To answer this commercial, you have to reply with a context powerful enough to subsume the commercial and neutralize its challenge.

Meanwhile, having roused your attention, the advertiser makes the pitch for hair conditioner, then vanishes--leaving us to our own devices for solving the puzzle of beauty and hate.

To answer this commercial, you have to reply with a context powerful enough to subsume the commercial and neutralize its challenge.

During the remaining 28 seconds of the commercial, the script does emphasize that change takes time--even change in the way your hair looks. The writers of the commercial probably hoped viewers wouldn't dismiss Pantene as yet another product that promised (and failed) to transform you instantly.

On the other hand, perhaps they were just trying to get you to use the conditioner for a longer time before moving restlessly to another package with another promise. Does this commercial redeem itself by saying that beautiful hair comes about slowly,

through dedicated effort? Or does it even more subtly exploit consumer despair by saying that, since beauty comes out of a bottle (albeit a little slowly), if you don't look like this model, you just don't have what it takes?

In discussing a single line on a single television commercial, I have sought to provide the most fundamental requirement for interpreting meaning: a context that makes sense of it (Douglas, 1970, 37). Unfortunately, there is no procedure for identifying the correct, best, or even a good context by which to bring meaning to a given event. But because the line turns on "hate" and because it uses some of the strategies that have led critics to call advertising a form of religion, perhaps terms from the traditional moral vocabulary have provided an appropriate context for interpreting the commercial. I have considered the commercial a "mythic" way for ritually discharging envy, and I have argued that the neglected universal emotions of despair, envy, and hate are potential byproducts of the cognitive strategies employed in certain types of advertising.

This paper has sought to open up a fleeting, seemingly trivial moment--a single line of a single television commercial--in order to glimpse the intricate symbolic resonances that we share under the guise of ordinary reality.

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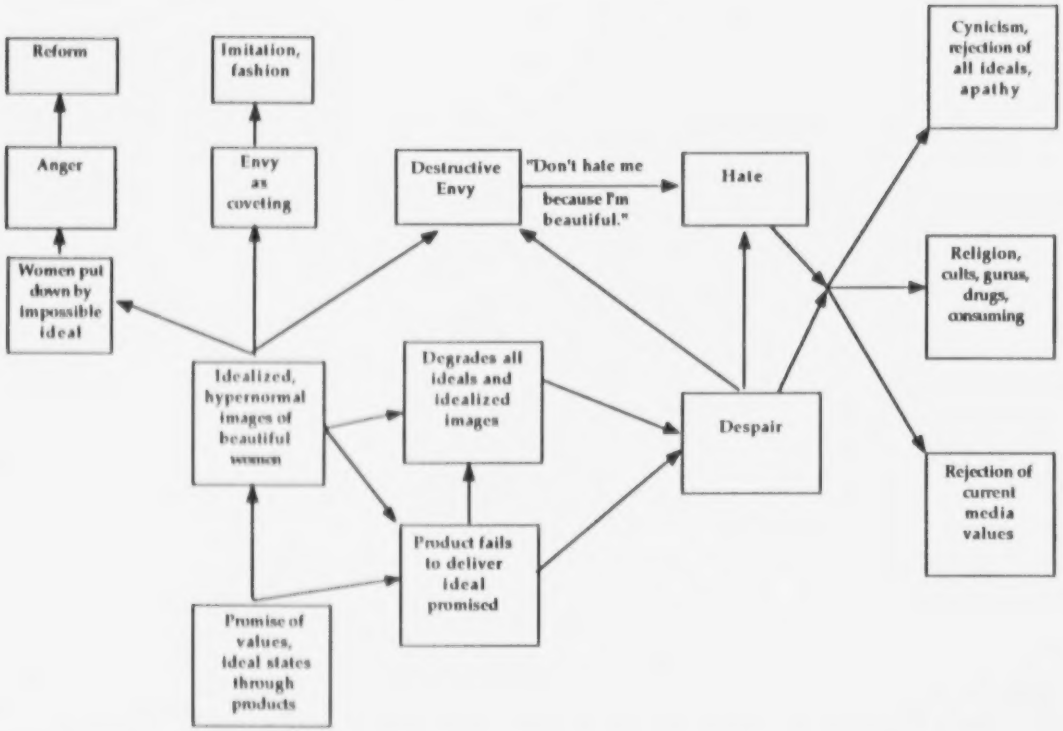
Reform
Anger
Women put down by impossible ideal
Imitation, fashion
Envy as coveting
Idealized, hypernormal images of beautiful women
Promise of values, ideal states through products
Destructive Envy
"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful."
Degrades all ideals and idealized images
Product fails to deliver ideal promised
Hate
Despair
Cynicism, rejection of all ideals, apathy
Religion, cults, gurus, drugs, consuming
Rejection of current media values

Figure 3. The context proposed for "Don't Hate Me Because I'm Beautiful," connecting hate, beauty, and advertising.

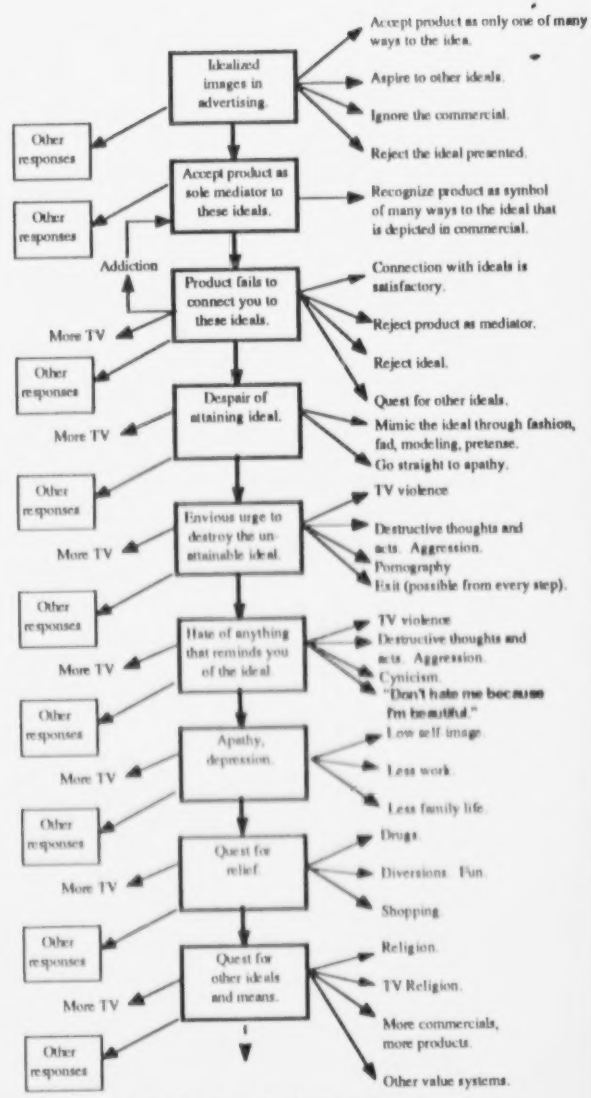
Idealized images in advertising.
Accept product as only one of many ways to the idea.
Aspire to other ideals.
Ignore the commercial.
Reject the ideal presented.
Other responses
Accept product as sole mediator to these ideals.
Recognize product as symbol of many ways to the ideal that is depicted in commercial.
Addiction
Product fails to connect you to these ideals.
Connection with ideals is satisfactory.
Reject product as mediator.
Reject ideal.
Quest for other ideals.
More TV
Despair of attaining ideal.
Mimic the ideal through fashion, fad, modeling, pretense.
Go straight to apathy.
Envious urge to destroy the unattainable ideal.
TV violence
Destructive thoughts and acts. Aggression.
Pornography
Exit (possible from every step).
Hate of anything that reminds you of the ideal.
TV violence
Destructive thoughts and acts. Aggression.
Cynicism.
"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful."
Apathy, depression.
Low self image.
Less work.
Less family life.
Quest for relief.
Drugs.
Diversions. Fun.
Shopping.
Quest for other ideals and means.
Religion.
TV Religion.
More commercials, more products.
Other value systems.

Figure 2. Chain of hypothetical responses to TV commercials depicting idealized images, with other responses suggested.

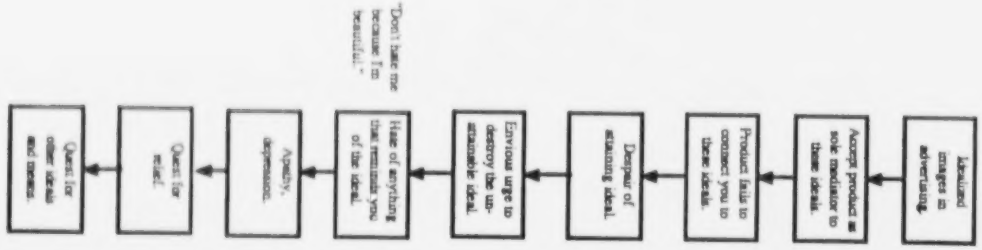
Idealized images in advertising.
Accept product as sole mediator to these ideals.
Product fails to connect you to these ideals.
Despair of attaining ideal.
Envious urge to destroy the unattainable ideal.
Hate of anything that reminds you of the ideal.
"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful."
Apathy, depression.
Quest for relief.
Quest for other ideals and means.

Figure 1.
Chain of hypothetical responses to TV commercials depicting idealized images, showing author's context for "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful."